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Proper 28 • 2 Thessalonians 3:(1–5) 6–13 • November 17, 2013

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Since becoming a seminary professor, I have been unpleasantly surprised at the number of lay people who have told me that they do not believe their parish pastor is working very hard. Note that this is their perception, and is not necessarily truth. They have said things like, “Our pastor preaches and teaches on Sunday morning, attends a few meetings and does a few pastoral visits, but not much else that we see.” When I have been allowed to inquire about why they have such a perception, often they have

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misguided assumptions about how many hours it takes to do certain pastoral functions. I have had lay leaders tell me that they think it takes a pastor less than an hour to plan a worship service and only two to three hours to write a sermon. They have been surprised (but not always convinced) when I told them those pastoral functions often take five times longer than their estimate, and that other pastoral functions are done in private settings that a layperson never sees.

I state this as prologue to the pastor's decision about text and context. I assume that there are some pastors who do not work as many hours as they should, but I also assume that if you are taking the time to read *Concordia Journal* in preparation for your preaching task, you are probably not one of those. Yet, it is good for you to know that some lay people might perceive your labor as less burdensome than it is. If you think that a plurality of your listeners have that perception, you might either consider not preaching on this text (although you could allude to it if you preach on the Malachi 4 or Luke 21 lessons), or to include some evidence in your sermon of your toil among and with them (although you would have to be careful not to sound defensive or self-serving).

Preaching on the theology of labor presented in this text is also complicated by the economics of the time and region. If many of your congregants are retired, or are unemployed or under-employed because of conditions that are largely out of their control, preaching generically on this text could bring about an unintended shame. Others may be addicted to their work and see this text as a rationale for their overwork and, therefore, under-attention to their other vocations in life.

But we are called upon to proclaim the "whole counsel of God." If you do believe that this "stewardship of labor" message is important for your listeners to hear, here are some suggestions:

Introduction: Our God is a working God. When he first introduces himself to us in Genesis 1, he is busy creating the entire universe in just six days. He speaks, and with the word of his mouth, he creates light and water and dry land and vegetation and sun and moon and stars and living creatures and then Adam. Then after he had worked for six days, he rested and blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Gn 2:3). He placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, a paradise. But when we think of paradise, we're often prone to thinking mainly of leisure, like some tropical vacation paradise where it is other people's jobs to take care of the vacationers. Yet when "the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden," he did so with the design that Adam (and Eve) were "to work it and keep it" (Gn 2:15). We sometimes think that our work-a-day existence is only a result of our sin-filled situation, but God gave work to our kind even before the fall, and work was good.

Unfortunately Adam and Eve were tempted by the serpent, doubted God's plan for their lives, ate the fruit and fell into sin. The LORD God sent them out from the garden of Eden to continue to work the ground (2:23), but before he sent them out, he said to Adam "cursed is the ground because of you ... thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you ... By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground for out of it you were taken; for you are dust and to dust you shall return." The fall into sin surely did complicate work, make it much more difficult, for some people

even dangerous, but work in and of itself is a good gift from God, something he created for us all to do.

We see continued evidence of that in the rest of Scripture (examples could include Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, the prophets, the apostles as fishermen, Paul a tent maker, and of course, our Lord Jesus as a carpenter).

However, our Lord Jesus did not come into the world just to model hard work for us. His was a much larger calling, the largest vocation. The word made flesh made all things at creation (Jn 1:3), but 2000 years ago he came to recreate all things through his suffering, sacrificial death, and resurrection.

Like us, the Christians in Thessalonica had been called by the Holy Spirit, through the preaching of Paul (Acts 17) to trust in Jesus Christ for their rescue in this dead and dying world (passive, vertical righteousness, our identity is in Christ).

But some of them “missed the memo” about how we are to respond to this gracious gift of salvation, by loving our neighbor and being about our various vocations in this life (active, horizontal righteousness). We don’t fully know the motivation of the idlers. They may have been misusing the charitableness of more well-to-do believers (Acts 17:4) or they may have been so fixated on Christ’s return that they neglected their current vocations.

How does Paul’s instruction to the Thessalonian believers apply to us still today? (This is where the pastor will need to know his own congregation and community to best know how to encourage the able to “earn their own living” and “not grow weary at doing good” [cf. 1 Cor 15:58, Gal 6: 9–10].) To all, but especially to those who are less able to work because of disability or age, encourage them to be praying for you and other pastors and church workers (v. 1) so that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored.

In closing: our God is a working God who has blessed us with the opportunity to serve him as his instruments to love and serve our neighbor.